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ABSTRACT

A recurring issue in the library field is the possible merger of public and school libraries into one joint venture with a single administration. In anticipation of increased emphasis on library consolidation in the future, a brief analysis of North Dakota's current library situation reveals that it is characterized by inconsistent service, scarce funds, and a shortage of options, making merger a possible alternative. This proposal has traditionally been based on the contention that in areas of limited population and resources, the operation of one library is more efficient than two, but this theory has not been proven in practice. Arguments for merger include economic and budgetary savings; increased credibility, strength and effectiveness; a stronger sense of community; and better ability to attract young readers and keep them as patrons. Anti-merger arguments claim that the economic savings tend to be more illusion than reality. This is because school and public libraries have very different audiences and goals that cannot be blended smoothly. In the case of a merger, the lesser partner (usually the public library) diminishes in importance. Population, public interest, goodwill and cooperative attitude of participants, and strength of library staff are determining factors in the viability of consolidation. Mergers are advised to be done with caution, and creative cooperative arrangements are recommended as possible alternatives to the problematic option of consolidation. (MAS)

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A Discrete Inquiry:

Is the Merging of School and Public Libraries a Viable Option in the State of North Dakota?

Prepared by
the Governor's Advisory Council on
Libraries

IR055374

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Of the many perpetually recurring issues in library land, few pop up as regularly as the proposal that, given certain conditions, public and school libraries should become joint ventures, managed by a single administrator, and usually housed under one roof. Debated, attempted, analyzed, condemned, applauded over the past half century, the merger option continues to appeal to some and appall others. We do not propose to put the issue to rest in these few pages; we aim to do nothing more than reopen the matter for discussion, partially with the expectation that it will rise on its own anyway, sometime soon -- perhaps in conjunction with school redistricting talks. As -- and if -- an emphasis on consolidation increases and the possible formation of mega-districts looms, it is likely that calls for library reorganization will again be heard in the State, and old theories will be brought out once more.

Anticipating, then, the shape of discussions yet to come, the Governor's Advisory Council on Libraries decided to devote some of its abundant energy to reexamining this issue and attempting to summarize it. Though we have arrived at no definitive conclusions, we were able to sort a few things out -- general premises, common arguments (both pro and

con), points of agreement, possible local applications, and the like.

Our examination consisted of reviewing and discussing about twenty pieces of library literature on the subject, covering experiences not only in this country, but also in Canada, Norway, New Zealand, and Australia. Much of what we read was repetitious, much tedious, some mildly enlightening. Some even dealt with libraries in small and remote places. None, however, related point-for-point to the types of situations apt to occur in North Dakota. Here a combination of factors -- scant population, miniscule budgets, lack of alternative funding sources, low library profiles and lower expections -- make the State, if not precisely unique, at least something of a special case.

Not so special, however, that a single solution exists for all its problems. In North Dakota, as elsewhere, different places assign different values to library services -- some so little that the service is virtually invisible, as it is, for instance, in the six counties where there are no libraries at all. One-third of the seventy-nine public libraries in the State attempt to operate on annual budgets of less than five-thousand dollars; one-half on less than ten-thousand. A similar picture appears when per capita standards are applied. As an overall average, less than $1.50 per person is spent on library service in the State; of existing libraries, half spend under five dollars per year per person; eighty percent, less than ten. Given such relatively meager resources, it is not surprising to find a third of the State's public libraries unable

to add 250 items (including gifts) to their collection per year; sixty percent add less than 500.

Such statistics have been cited before, often enough to create the impression of a state virtually destitute, undeveloped, and probably undevelopable. We would like to bury that impression. Fine libraries, both school and public, do exist in North Dakota, and library pride is not limited to the six or eight major population centers. In fact, one of the two localities spending more than fifteen dollars per capita on library service has fewer than a thousand inhabitants; the other, slightly more than a thousand. The problem in North Dakota is not that no one cares, but rather that care is not consistent; pockets of good library service are surrounded by areas of no library service. In the past few years, plans to remedy the situation have been coming along at a one-every-other-year rate. Essentially dealing with ways of reorganizing and realigning library services within the State, these plans have yet to ignite public enthusiasm -- perhaps, in part, because public involvement and interest have been limited. And, in part, because the plans have been judged too expensive, too centralized, too bureaucratic to be workable.

Faced then with the prospect of inconsistent service, scarce funds, and an apparent shortage of viable alternatives, the resurrection of the "merged libraries" concept would seem to be almost certain. Usually billed as a handy and economical way of improving the product, the merger proposal has traditionally been based on the contention that in areas of limited population and resources, one library operation is

bound to be more efficient than two -- operational and administrative expenses can be reduced, holdings increased, and in the process, effectiveness enhanced. It is a tidy theory; its apparent sensibility probably accounts for its durability. It is virtually guaranteed to reappear whenever capital expenditures -- new buildings, bond issues, remodeling, retrenching of any sort -- appear imminent.

Unfortunately, the theory has not proven out in practice -- at least not to everyone's satisfaction. There is, within the library community, a general (though by no means universal) feeling that marriages of this sort cannot work. Quite often they don't. Of the eight or ten mergers effected in North Dakota over the past twenty years, only two appear to have flourished; several have already disintegrated and others seem simply to exist, displaying neither notable vigor nor visible mortality. Results from other parts of the world have been equally inconclusive, at least according to the literature available to us. Still, some such unions have worked -- enough, we feel, to warrant a closer look.

Our closer look seems to indicate that, for one thing, the arguments for and against the yoking of public and school libraries have not varied much over the past quarter century.

Economy appears to be the principle attraction; essentially the pro-merger position is that one first-rate (or second or third-rate) library is better and cheaper than two of lesser rates. Combined budgets, they say, will go further simply because overhead costs will be cut: less money for rent, heat,

lights, duplicate personnel and so forth will automatically translate into more money for materials. Furthermore, they maintain that less obvious benefits should accrue: one fairly solid merged library will be playing with a much stronger hand than two struggling operations; it will be more credible, more effective. Other advantages could include the formation of a stronger sense of community, and the likelihood of attracting readers earlier and holding them longer.

Skeptics insist that none of the above arguments are necessarily so. The economies, they say, tend to be more illusion than reality. Because school and public libraries have some very essential differences -- audiences, aims -- neither space nor staff, nor the collection, can be blended smoothly. Furthermore, such mergers are almost never the marriage of equals, and, as a result, the lesser partner -- usually the public library -- is apt to diminish in importance. Critics point to statistics indicating decreased adult use, space constraints, and hours tailored to the school schedule. In their way of thinking, the concept fails to account for the human factor in library service, tending to subordinate all elements to the demands of a fancied efficiency. In summary, they see the savings as slight, the improvements as minimal, and the end product probably not much better than the original entities.

Allowing for the customary over-simplifications and over-statements, it would seem then, as usual, that the cases both for and against merger are reasonable enough to suggest that some sort of middle ground ought to be discovered. In the interest of providing those who seek that ground with a

few guidelines, we have attempted to synthesize bits of advice gathered from readings and discussion. The bits are neither absolute nor exhaustive, nor, for all that, particularly authoritative; still, they may provide a place from which to begin.

One naturally wonders if there is some sort of magic number, an optimum population, above which merged libraries are unnecessary, and below, a distinct possibility. Conventional wisdom appears to suggest that communities of more than ten-thousand people ought to be able to operate separate public and school facilities, a standard which probably can't be applied to North Dakota where there are only nine cities with a population of more than ten-thousand. The existence of county library systems and the potential existence of larger multi-community school districts further complicates the numbers picture; evidently, things other than population statistics will have to be used to determine the feasibility of joining school and public libraries.

But what? Which factors are to be given what weight in determining the viability of a projected merger? Everything we have read suggests that the basic considerations are interest on the part of the public, goodwill and a spirit of cooperation on the part of the participants -- boards, superintendents, librarians, as well as taxpayers. It should go without saying that if a community's interest in library service is lukewarm or less, no amount of structural rearrangement is going to produce a vital operation; the presence of a substantial and committed public and a competent and creative staff are as

necessary as books, and more necessary than buildings. So, once again, the "people factor" is a matter of paramount importance. Indeed, in case after case -- local as well as national -- the success of a merger has ultimately depended upon the determination and dedication of one person, usually the librarian.

Assuming interest, goodwill, and a cooperative mood, it is also extremely important to have details worked out in advance and agreed upon formally. In addition to eternal questions about who is supposed to pay how much for what, many other details can be particularly troublesome: hours, public usage, the division of space and materials, collection development decisions, the establishment of priorities -- all issues best addressed early in the process.

In summary, then, it would appear that the possibility of merging school and public libraries at selected North Dakota locations should not be dismissed out-of-hand, nor should it be held out as a ready solution to the problems of struggling establishments. It has been tried and it has worked, though not often. Perhaps if more care was taken in building the mergers, the incidence of success might be higher. But, under the best of circumstances, it is apt to be a tricky proposition, fraught with potential for small disasters. It is an option which should be approached with caution, considered with patience and detachment, and entered into only when and where interest and evidence of support exist, where turf battles have all been settled beforehand, and where some sort of formal and thorough agreement has been worked out and mutually accepted.

Meanwhile, we might point out that options -- both less formal and less formidable -- may be available. The possibility of exploring more creative cooperative arrangements is always present; such arrangements might begin with coordinating purchases and scheduling, strengthening interlibrary loan capabilities, sharing available resources -- all the while maintaining degrees of autonomy, distinct clienteles, and, more than likely, separate locations. It might be wise to start by working together on the essentials of library service -- public awareness, access, strengthening the collections. If that progresses smoothly, the potential of some sort of joint operation might then be explored.